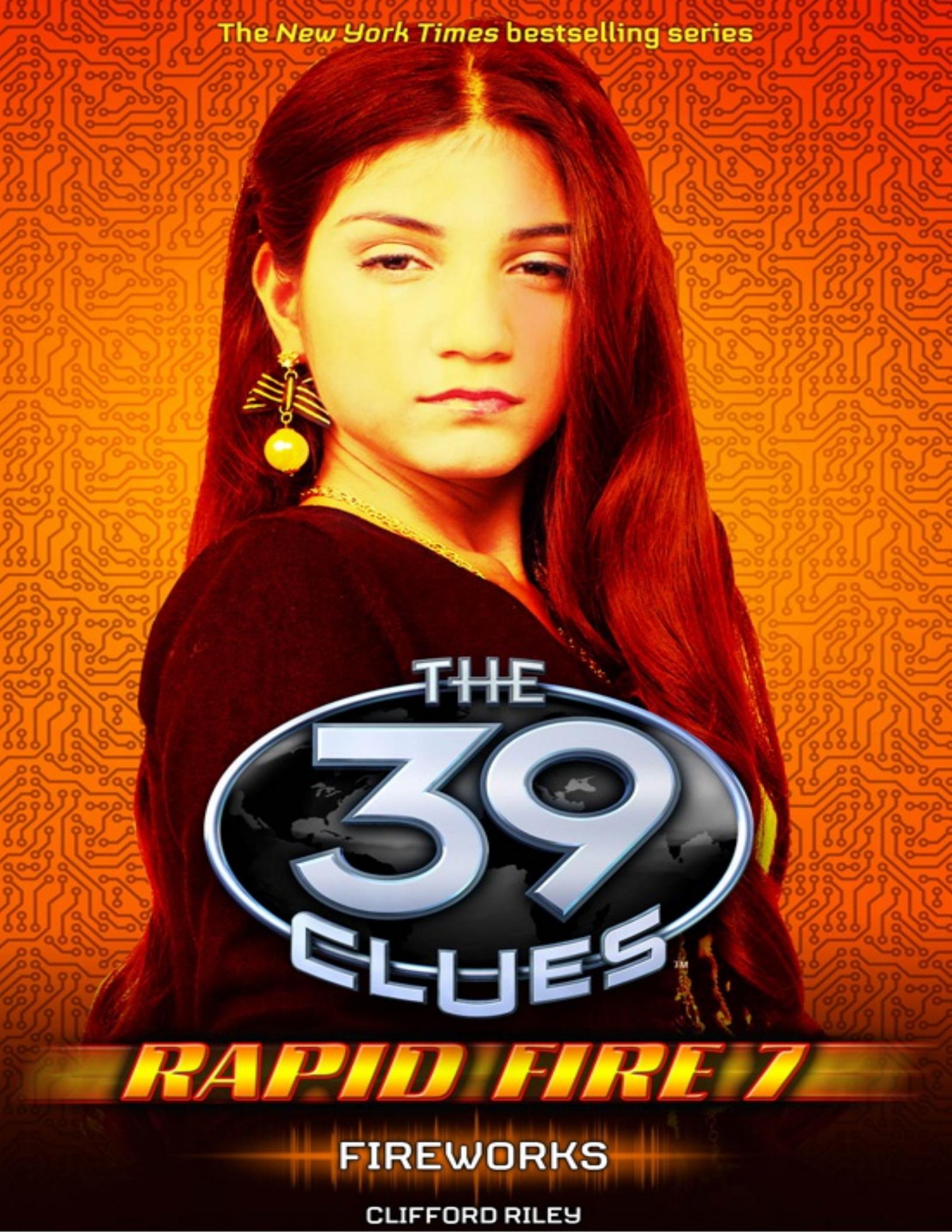


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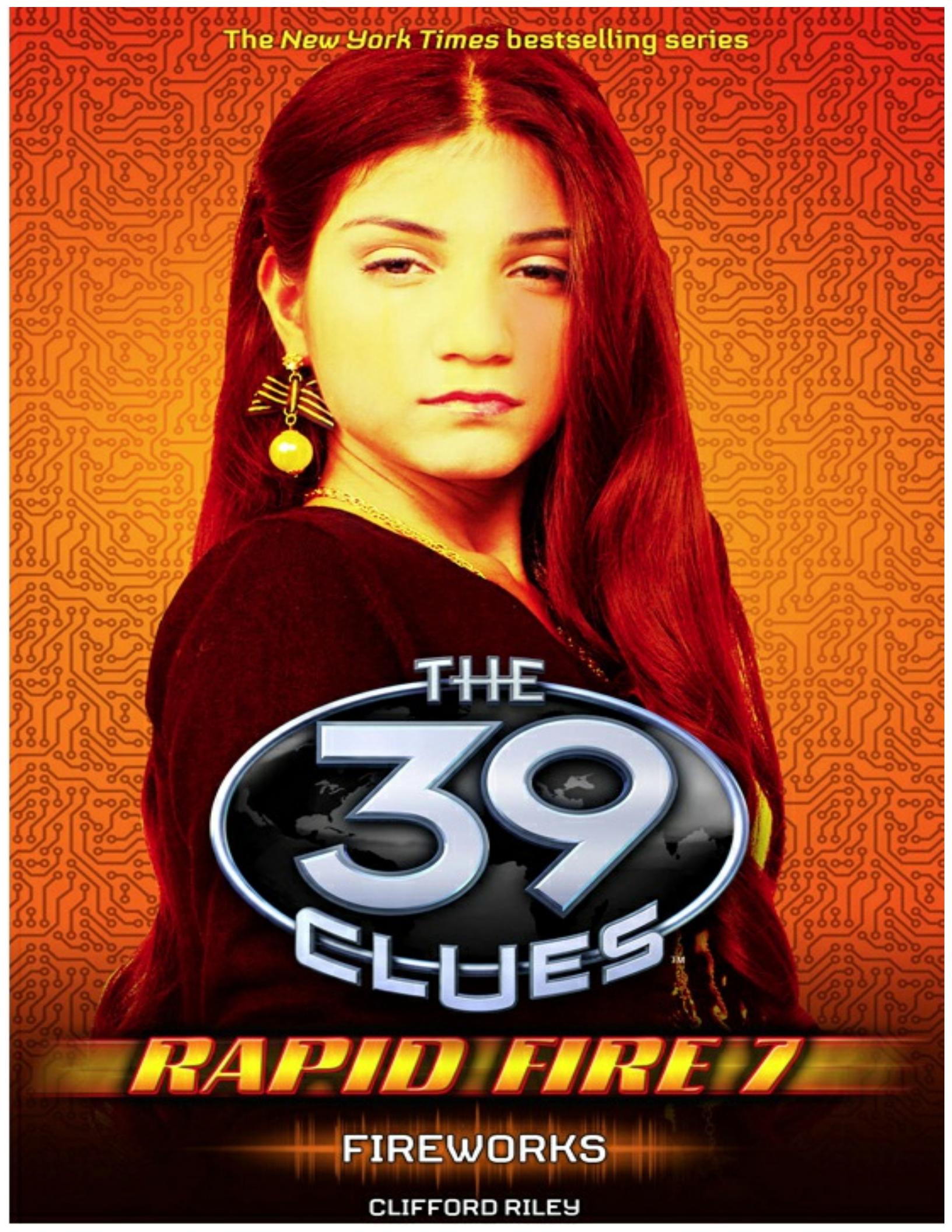
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FIREWORKS

Fifteen Months After the Clue Hunt

Amy Cahill's alarm went off at five A.M.: another day, the same old drill. Flying classes. Defensive driving. Martial arts. Cross-training. Strength training. Weight training. Research. Language tutors. Logic tests that made SAT prep look like finger painting. She didn't go to sleep at the end of the day — she crashed, too exhausted some nights even to switch off her bedside lamp. Technically, it was winter break, the day before New Year's Eve, but it didn't feel like a holiday to Amy.

How exactly did I become the head of the most powerful family in the world at only fifteen? she asked herself for the umpteenth time. She'd been a regular girl until her grandmother Grace had died and used her will to kick off a worldwide hunt for 39 Clues safeguarding the source of the Cahills' power. A hunt that Amy and her younger brother, Dan, had won. Sure, it sounded impressive, but mostly it meant days and days of fear, waiting for really bad things to happen. Knowing that really bad things *had* happened: Her parents had been murdered. And some very nasty people had tried to murder Amy and Dan.

She still couldn't quite wrap her head around everything that had changed in only a year and a half. And just when Amy thought that maybe it was over, that maybe she and Dan could have a normal life, a new terror arrived to stalk the siblings. The Vespers. A criminal organization that wanted nothing less than world domination.

No, she vowed, not on my watch.

Amy shook the dark thoughts away and climbed into the shower. The lavender soap she used reminded Amy of her grandmother. What would Grace do if she were alive? Would she go on the offensive instead of waiting for the next Vesper attack like her coward of a granddaughter? Amy had rebuilt Grace's mansion, which had burned down in the Clue hunt. She'd allocated funds to help Cahills in need. She and Dan had traveled to faraway places and invested in expensive technology like the command center on the third floor of the mansion, all in a desperate attempt to find any information on the Vespers. But Grace had wisdom, the love of a good fight, and an unstoppable spirit. Grace was a natural. No matter how hard Amy trained and worked, there was no way she could measure up.

Amy threw on workout clothes and pulled her hair back.

Another day, another threat to the world. If only Grace were alive —

Amy wasn't cut out for this.



“All right, Amy, let me have it!” Sinead Starling, Amy’s cousin, shouted, hopping back and forth on her toes and holding up two black pads for Amy to punch. Sinead had just finished her boxing session, and now it was Amy’s turn.

They were in the basement gym — weight-lifting machines, cardio, and the boxing studio off to one side. There were wall-to-wall mirrors, springy mats, bins of gloves and tape and pads. For Amy and Sinead, being able to land a right hook once in a while, and, even more important, knowing how to duck one, was crucial.

Amy taped up her knuckles, weaving in and out of her fingers, and strapped on the gloves. She shielded her eyes with her big gloves, like mitts, and began to rock back and forth, hitting each of Sinead’s pads in a one-two combination.

“That’s it?” Sinead asked, and they began to circle each other, like animals sniffing for the alpha. Sinead did a slow swing over the top of Amy’s head, her red hair bouncing out behind her, and Amy ducked out of the way. She jabbed at the pads a few more times.

“Harder,” Sinead said, pushing back with each of Amy’s punches.

Amy hit harder.

“Now uppercut, elbow jab. One-one-two. Come on, Amy, whose side are you on?”

Amy threw harder. She ducked out of the way of an incoming blow. Her arms felt unfastened. Her legs may as well have been trudging through swamps. Her lungs weren’t pulling down enough oxygen — Amy was out of breath before the tough part of her training had even started. The endless, endless training that would never be enough.

“I’m hitting as hard as I can!” Amy yelled back.

“Okay, stop,” Sinead said. Amy stopped. “Look. I know we’ve seen some hard things,” she began.

You were part of it, Amy wanted to say, but she was breathing too hard.

“I want you to close your eyes, and remember it. In your head. Just relive it for a second.”

Amy closed her eyes and steeled herself to go back to the dark places. To the smell of the flames that burned down her parents’ town house. The crippling pain that had twisted through her, knowing that her parents were inside and she was outside and there was nothing she could do about it.

Amy’s lip was quivering. Once buried in the worst of it, it was hard to reemerge on the other side. “Now,” Sinead said, “I want you to imagine you have thirty seconds to get the person responsible for all of it. If you could give them just a piece of what you are feeling with your fists, what would your fists say?”

Amy landed her hardest blow of the day. A big pop in the center of the black pad.

“Not bad,” Sinead said. “What else?”

Amy let her shoulder rear back. Tired? *Big deal.* No Grace and dead parents? *Suck it up.* Skiing down a mountain with a killer breathing down your neck? Amy landed one combination punch, and then another, and then another, one-two-one-two-one-two-one, fast, faster, the fastest she’d ever gone

and the hardest, her arms gaining energy with each impact. The fists balled up in her gloves kept hitting glorious smacks in the center of the pad.

Her arms no longer felt part of her body; it was like they had their own motor, taking off, gaining momentum, rocketing away.

She didn't notice when she started crying, but there they were, tears dripping on her T-shirt, burning her eyes along with the sweat sliding down her face. And still she kept punching, because it was one of the rare times she'd let herself feel. She was scared: She could have died. Her brother could have died. And now here she was.

Sinead lowered her pads. "Well said," Sinead said softly, and squeezed Amy's shoulder. "I think that's enough for today."

But it would never be enough. Only Amy and Dan knew about the Vespers. Only they understood the evil the Cahills were up against.

"Hey, kiddos," Nellie said, peeking her head into the studio. Nellie was Amy's au pair, but she'd become more like an older sister. "There you are! Time for dinner. I made frog-leg enchiladas," she said, her smile fading as she took in Amy's wet-rat appearance and tear-streaked face. "Hey, you okay?"

Amy wiped her forehead with her shirt, took a cold sip of water, and put the bottle down.

"I am. I'm actually okay," Amy said.



Dan Cahill had been planning the joyride for months.

The regimens Amy tried to push on him every day — the exercise, crash courses: What was even the point? And he couldn't make himself care about seventh-grade tests and homework anymore, or hockey tryouts, not after what he'd seen. What was algebra when you'd been the target of death

threats? Dan didn't want to be chased and hunted, but since he'd been back home, everything felt like it was coming through in black-and-white instead of color.

Enter the midnight joyride.

Technically, he was thirteen, which meant what he was about to do was not exactly legal. But he'd already driven before, in St. Petersburg. Now he was willing to admit he'd been awful at it, but the one lesson he'd accepted since then from Amy was defensive driving.

A little ride through the back roads would be his shot of Technicolor. He would definitely tell his cousin Jonah about it, after it was over. He already knew exactly which car he had in mind — Grace's mint green 1969 Ford Mustang, in perfect condition. Even though nobody drove it anymore, Dan waxed it once in a while, just to see it shine. In the glove compartment, he'd found a pair of Grace's leather driving gloves that still carried the scent of her perfume, even more than a year later.

Gentlemen, Dan thought as he put the key into the ignition, *start your engines*.

Dan always won the races in video arcades, but this time he was racing himself. As if he could work up enough speed to travel back and undo all the bad stuff that had happened.

Dan pulled the seat up so that he could be close enough for a firm grip on the wheel, but far enough away to lightly drape his arm over it, like dudes in music videos. He checked his mirrors, put the car in reverse, and pulled out of the garage onto the driveway. *Sweet!* he thought. Even Amy would have to admit his driving had improved. He was a pro.

Dan fiddled with the old-timey radio dial until he found a rap station. It would be a good sign if Jonah came on the radio right then, hammering out his latest platinum single. Dan turned up the volume knob as high as it would go. Nellie would be asleep. There was no way Uncle Fiske or Amy could hear him when he was all the way down on the driveway. The mansion was too big, the roads too wide.

It was a clear, cold night, and the moon cut like a wafer. Dan cranked down the top of the convertible so he could get the full effect — the wind in his hair, tires giddyupping to life on the icy

driveway. To counter the cold air, he blasted heat from the old vents. The Mustang drove smoothly for such an old car, and the wheel felt good in his hands; his foot on the gas, he was in control.

Buckle up, Dan told himself, you're in for a wild ride.

At the end of the long, long driveway leading away from the mansion toward the road, the gate opened slowly, slowly. The wheels skidded slightly on the ice from the recent storm.

He turned the wheel arm over arm in a laid-back, chill kind of way, as if he'd been doing this his whole life. The Mustang made a right turn. Then, when he was headed away from the mansion, he pushed the gas pedal until he could hear the car start to roar. He shifted up into second, grateful that his instructor had taught him how to drive a stick. The roads were empty, there was nobody awake or around for miles, and Dan pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator. Third gear. *Time to see what this baby can do.*

The road ahead curved sharply. Dan knew he was supposed to slow down before going into the turn, but he sped up to fourth gear instead, taking the turn at the last possible moment, the car fishtailing to the other side of the street before Dan could straighten out. The car righted itself, sliding only slightly on the ice, and Dan laughed out loud. He could take down anything. Faster. Fifth.

There, he said to the road, you like that?

Dan was pushing a hundred now, the needle pulsing down into the red. He'd never gone this fast in his whole life, even as a passenger. It felt amazing — everything a blur as he blew right past it. The cemetery, the woods. Acres and acres of the Cahill estate that normally would have taken five times as long to navigate. The night was cold, especially with the top down, but Dan couldn't remember the last time he'd felt the wind on his face like this, the race of his heartbeat, hair flapping about wildly, his mouth breaking into a grin. Dan pushed the car faster still.

The radio station switched to a commercial. Dan took his eyes off the road to channel surf for a better song. When he looked up, it was too late. There was a fallen tree as wide around as a barn fully blocking the road, its roots tangled and huge. Getting larger and larger by the second.

Dan slammed on the brake with both feet, one on top of the other to try and force the car to stop, the tires squealing hideously, the smell of rubber rising up from the road. Dan's body shot forward toward the windshield, the seat belt barely keeping his small body in the car. He couldn't downshift — there was no time. Dan was headed straight for the tree, full force, like a roller coaster off its rails.

Lightning quick, Dan pulled up the emergency brake. The car slid sharply, wheels spinning out from under him, and he was sliding on the ice, the car whipping around in circles. The tree was there, and then it wasn't, it was closer, and then it wasn't, and then — *SMACK!*

The car crashed sideways into the fallen tree, whacking Dan hard up against the shattering windshield. The dashboard knocked out his breath, loosened a tooth. With the roof down, the tree shook branches on him like artillery, firing down on his head and neck and shoulders. He could feel a thousand cuts splintering into his face. His ears exploded.

The worst part was: Right before he hit the tree, at the moment of truth — he hadn't even cared if he hit or not.

It was almost as if he'd been asking for it.



“Okay,” Amy said, trying to connect the many voices on the video conference call. “The Cahill extended-family meeting will now come to order.”

Flashing red lights bleeped throughout the high-tech command center. A lit-up world map had glowing markers on the dangerous places to watch closely. Floor-to-ceiling flat screens lined the walls, awaiting her far-flung relatives, who were videoing in from all over the world. That was why they had to schedule the meeting so early in the morning, because of the time differences. But Amy would have been up anyway.

After a wash of static, in popped her many teenage cousins: Natalie and Ian Kabra from London; Hamilton Holt, mountain climbing in Switzerland; and last, covered in silver glitter, multiplatinum teen idol Jonah Wizard, gearing up for the kickoff of his world tour in New York City. In the background, you could hear female fans screaming outside his trailer. Even before dawn.

“What’s this, a courthouse?” Dan asked glumly, his face entirely bandaged, his arm in a cast. “Since when has the Cahill family ever *come to order*?” He put his head down on his folded arms.

Amy hadn’t slept at all last night. Worry was like caffeine. After the ER trip with Dan, she’d hobbled back to her bed and had a few minutes to sob into her pillow before washing her face and heading up to the command center. She could still feel pillow lines on her forehead. She looked out over her notepad at her brother, who winced when lifting his head to sip his orange juice. He was all drugged up on painkillers and didn’t want to eat, on top of everything else.

“Everyone,” Amy said, “Dan had a little accident last night.” Her voice wavered, but she willed herself not to stutter.

A clamor of “Are you okay?” and “What happened?” and “Feel better, dude!” poured out from the screens.

“Thanks, everybody,” Dan said, his voice straining. “I’m okay. I sorta messed up.” His voice cracked when he glanced at Amy. “But I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just focus on the meeting.”

“Here’s the agenda,” Amy said, willing her voice to be strong, trying not to relive the horror of waking up in the middle of the night to find her brother covered in blood. She’d practiced this many times the day before, since the idea of bossing everyone around made her want to crawl under the table. “The hunt may be over, but that doesn’t mean we’re safe. We don’t know who’s out there, or what they’re willing to do to get the clues.” Amy’s voice sounded over-rehearsed. It was hard to convince her relatives that the threat was real without telling them about the Vespers. And that wasn’t something she was ready to do. After all her family had been through, they deserved a break.

Sinead was taking meeting notes on her computer. She waited for Amy to continue.

“Item one: training schedules. I’ve constructed hour-by-hour day planners for all of you, to make sure we are all doing our part. These include research reports on Cahill clues, physical training, and security measures.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Jonah broke in. “I’m getting ready to kick off my world tour, homes. There’s no way I have time to fit all this in. My dad already has everything scheduled for me, down to when I go to the bathroom.”

“Sinead,” Amy continued, trying to push on, “you’re in charge of the new department of defense. I need monthly reports with updates on security threats.”

“Sure, it’s not like I have anything else to do anyway,” Sinead replied sarcastically.

People don’t have to like their assignments, Amy thought, *but they do have to abide by them.* If she could be convincing enough.

“Ham,” Amy said, ignoring Sinead.

“Present,” Ham said.

“I have you on a strict physical fitness regime and advanced weaponry training. So that you can act as a kind of bodyguard, should we need it.”

“Sweet!” Ham said. “When do I start?”

“Immediately,” Amy said, smiling. At least someone was happy.

Ham started firing shots from his finger, complete with sound effects. “*Bam!*” he shouted, “*Bam, bam, bam!*” Perhaps this wasn’t the best idea.

“Ian will be in charge of the new department of finance. Doing financial upkeep on the clue hunt accounts. We want to make sure we’re up to speed on international tax laws and that the accounts are managed in secret. Also, Natalie will be allocating funds to upcoming projects.”

“This isn’t a tree-house club,” Ian piped up. “We can hire professionals to do these tasks for us, you know. You pay people like accountants and bodyguards and librarians —”

“And what?” Amy shot back. “Risk letting our enemies infiltrate when we take out a ‘Secret Bodyguard Needed’ ad on the Internet?”

“Jonah, you are in charge of public relations,” Amy went on. “We have to keep a strong hold on our public perception—”

“Not gonna fly, cuz,” Jonah sighed.

“All of this is mad!” Natalie cut in. “*We* aren’t on the Forbes One Hundred list. I refuse to work for an organization that doesn’t offer car service and corporate accounts.”

“Dan and I will be in charge of the research department,” Amy said, not looking up for fear that tears would start to fall. This wasn’t going as she’d planned.

Dan sighed heavily. “Amy,” he said softly, “we don’t even know who we’re researching.”

“Well, does anybody else have any bright ideas?” Amy asked, throwing up her hands. “B-b- because I am all ears. I’ve put a lot of thought into this distribution of labor, but if you all think you can do it so much better, go ahead.” She searched the faces on the screens. “Please! If anybody has a better plan to try and stop the people out to kill us, don’t be shy.”

The Cahill cohort was quiet. For a second.

Then a chorus of chatter broke out on-screen, everyone talking over each other, cutting each other off.

“Meathead!” Natalie shrieked at Hamilton.

“Spoiled brat!” he shot right back.

Ian was looking at Amy and muttering under his breath. She thought she heard him say “know-it-all.”

Amy would have cried if she had the energy. Dan was jerking his head awake to keep from nodding off. Sinead was giving her the cold shoulder and recording everyone’s put-downs in the meeting notes.

Amy slumped down in the swivel chair, tossing her notepad and pencil onto the operations desk. She eyed the rows and rows of secret file cabinets, containing all they’d learned so far, which wasn’t very much. The vaults were still mostly empty, the files all too thin. How would it ever be enough? There was so much to do. Not to mention that school would be starting up next week.

Nice leadership, she thought to herself. Way to bring everyone together.

“Hey, bros, can we wrap up this little family reunion? My publicist is saying I gotta bounce. Photo shoot,” Jonah said.

“Ah, the lifestyles of the rich and shameless,” Ian quipped. Amy knew for a fact that Ian and Natalie had at least a cool two million in the bank, but ever since their mother had disowned them, they’d been moping around like they were slumming it.

“Jealous much?” Jonah shot back.

“Our family would never fraternize with the kind of new-money peons you pal around with,” Natalie said. “It’s beneath us.”

“Right, I forgot. Daughters of Satan only meet on Thursdays,” Jonah said.

“Guys, guys!” Amy cut in. “Can’t we just agree to the schedules I’ve assigned and check in again with progress reports in a month? Item two —”

“Ian and I have to go. We’re throwing a fabulous party with our *civilized* friends. And there’s a menu to plan. And maids to fire.”

“Later, peeps. No rest for the richest celebrity under twenty,” Jonah said.

“Happy New Ye —” Amy started to say, but everyone had signed off before she could get it out. Sinead stormed out and slammed the door.

Well, that went well.

She looked over at Dan, who was unwrapping one of his bandages from his wrist. This was shaping up to be some New Year’s Eve, and the sun hadn’t even risen yet.

Then a crackle of static caught Amy’s attention. An incoming call? She went over to check the switchboard and realized that the line was still connected and the audio still on. Dan started to push himself out of his chair, but Amy put a finger to her lips: “Shhh.”

“It’s okay,” Ian was saying, over the sound of sniffles. “There, there, don’t muss up your five-thousand-threadcount Egyptian cotton kerchief.”

“But it’s all so ghastly,” Natalie explained. “How did it come to this? No party, no parents, and our only relatives don’t even *like* us. Even the *help* has somewhere to go on New Year’s Eve!” she cried.

Amy looked at Dan helplessly.

“You and I will find some fun,” Ian tried. “We could break out the good china and hire a string quartet!”

“Bah!” Natalie cried. “I wish we’d never learned of the clue hunt. I wish we’d never met the other Cahills.”

Amy had heard enough. She shut down the connection. The faces of her other cousins flashed before her — Jonah’s exhausted smile, Ham’s jaw tensing as he tried to keep the peace. In their own ways, they were all trying very hard to do what was right. Each one was hurting just as much as Amy, but each one was pretending they were fine. Where in the schedules she’d just passed out had she assigned time for a break?

“Amy,” Dan croaked from the corner, “I might need help getting down the stairs.”

Amy nodded and got up. Was this going to be how they met the new year? Injured and depressed? Would the rest of their lives be like this? It wasn’t like any of them could take a vacation. Vespers didn’t give you two weeks off for R & R.

Amy wished she could wave a magic wand and make it all go away. But she was only fifteen, after all.

And then she got it.

“Dan,” she said, “I have an idea. It’s super-risky, and probably counterproductive, and *definitely* a waste of resources.”

“Sounds awesome,” Dan huffed, out of breath just from trying to lift himself up.

Amy started pacing and talking fast. “How would we get to the mountain—we’d need a copter? And where could we reserve a site? We’d have to leave right now. Security, provisions!”

“Amy, breathe,” Dan said. “Slow down. What are you talking about? What’s so urgent that you forgot to add it to the agenda?”

“You’ll see,” Amy said, her face brightening. “Pack your bags, bro. It’s go time.”



Jonah Wizard had been onstage for what felt like forever. He’d rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed for days. He hadn’t eaten any of the silver-domed, room-service breakfast that his New York hotel had laid out for him — the family meeting had been too upsetting. He was feeling a little dizzy from lack of food and lack of sleep and being attacked by a mob of thirteen-year-old fans the night before. His world tour would begin two days from now, and everyone around him, his dad, his publicist, was all nerves and tension. On top of everything, there were the usual cameras filming for Jonah’s reality show, capturing his every facial movement.

“All right, from the top,” Jonah heard his director say from out in the cushy red seats. “This is our last rehearsal, people, so I want perfection.”

The stage lights on Jonah’s face were too bright — it was causing his pancake-thick makeup to run, and it was bad enough that he had to wear makeup at all in rehearsal. But they wanted to test it against the lighting and camera angles.

Jonah waited for his cue, the drum lead-in, before launching in on his hit track from the killer new album. He was not five words in before —

“CUT. CUT. That was all wrong,” boomed a voice through the megaphone. The director sounded a little off — Jonah hoped he wasn’t getting sick.

“For reals, yo?” Jonah said. He’d nailed the choreography perfectly and the lyrics had never been fresher.

“This time, we’d like you to do something a little different,” said the megaphone voice. The lights were too bright for Jonah to see into his director’s eyes, but Jonah hoped he was glaring into the right

spot of the empty concert seats. They'd rehearsed it a dozen times already. Seriously — did fame and fortune not buy anything anymore? Where was the respect?!

"This time," the voice said, "we'd like you to begin with . . ."

Jonah waited. This was why you became your own producer. This was why teen stars burned out before their twenty-first birthday bash.

"The chicken dance."

"Say what, yo?" Jonah must not have heard right. He was multiplatinum. He was a TV star. He had taught Michael Jackson's son how to moonwalk. Was this some sort of publicity stunt?

"That's right. You know, the one old people do at weddings, where you flap your arms and waddle around like a chicken. Except we'd also like you to squawk."

"Bro, get serious."

"Jonah," said the megaphone. "Remember, this is filming."

"Fine. Fine." Jonah hoped that his director's remarks would be left out of the reality show.

And so, instead of his sick drum solo lead-in, the cheesy chicken music blared from the gorgeous, refrigerator-sized speakers, and Jonah squawked and flapped and gobbled his way around the stage, doing his best funky-chicken/wedding-chicken dance impression. Or whatever it was. What he didn't know he made up, but he gave it everything he had, the full enchilada.

Finally, the stage lights dimmed, and Jonah could hear peals of laughter echoing through the theater. It cracked up in a familiar way, the voice breaking and hooting. Jonah made a visor with his hands to get a better look out into the seats. The auditorium lights came up, and there, holding a megaphone and jumping up and down, was his cousin.

"From the top!" Amy cried.

"Amy?!" Jonah said, too stunned to be embarrassed.

"Dude. That was great," Dan said, holding his stomach. "Ah, the laughing hurts," he cackled. "But it's totally worth it!" Tears were streaming down Dan's cheek.

“Glad I could help,” Jonah deadpanned. That rare sensation, embarrassment, was starting to creep into his voice. The reality TV crew slapped his cousins five.

“Yo, wassup? What are you two doing here?” Jonah sputtered. “Where is my director?”

“He’s on a breakfast break. We told him we’d oversee the rehearsal till he got back. He left us his megaphone.” Amy giggled. “You’ve been punked!”

“Oh,” Dan added, “and we got you the night off. You’re coming with us.”

“But my world tour — we have to rehearse tonight. I have to talk to my dad —”

“We think you’ve had enough rehearsal,” Amy said.

“Oh,” Dan added, “and you have to do what we say, ’cause we got that chicken dance on tape.”



Natalie and Ian Kabra were staring down the mouth of a torture chamber. As anti-festive as it seemed, it was their mother’s tradition to take her children to the Tower of London on holidays. Something about the gloominess of ancient armor and the gleam of creative weaponry put an extra spring in Isabel’s step. And even if their mother had technically disowned them, there was nothing that said Natalie and Ian couldn’t partake in the old Lucian tradition of morbid castle-going by themselves. The Tower of London was a Lucian stronghold, after all.

It was a dreary day on the Thames, but everyone else was out gallivanting, preparing for the evening’s celebrations. Natalie felt that she’d reached the absolute lowest of the low. Unseemly as it was to admit, Natalie had made up the lie about the stupid party, because the truth was that since her mother had disowned them, she and Ian were all alone now.

At that very moment, the lights went out. It was pitch-black.

“Ian?” she said, her voice quavering.

“Guards!” Ian called.

A voice rang out, slow and robotic, like Darth Vader. Ian and Natalie couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from.

"Don't move," the voice snarled. "You shall obey exact orders. When the lights come up, you are to remain silent."

Natalie could feel the world circling in on her. The ceiling felt like it was starting to spin. She was just about to faint when —

"Gotcha!" Amy cried, pulling off a gleaming gold helmet from the gift shop as the lights switched back on.

"What on Earth?" Natalie shrieked.

"How did you get here?" Ian asked, flabbergasted.

"Being part of the world's most powerful family has its advantages," Amy said.

"What in the world are you two doing here?" Natalie repeated, out of breath from her near hyperventilation.

"We've come to kidnap you," Dan said merrily.



Hamilton was ready for the summit. They were going to make it up the Matterhorn faster than anyone had ever climbed it before.

"Dad," Hamilton said, checking his watch and quickening his pace, "we're going to beat the record!"

The sooner we do, Hamilton thought, the sooner he forgets what a giant letdown I am. This would bring back the Holt family pride.

Only, it looked like someone, or *someones*, had beaten Ham and Eisenhower to the top. How was that possible? They'd seen nobody on the way up.

“Who in Sam Hill are those folks?” Eisenhower asked.

It was the first words his father had spoken to him all day. Ham knew that his father loved him, but the last few months, it hadn’t always felt like it. Since the Clue hunt, they no longer talked the way they used to, or watched sports together, or understood what the other was thinking during workouts, like most fathers and sons.

“Got me, Dad,” Ham said. The people up ahead didn’t look like ice climbers. They looked like goat herders, carrying walking sticks and not outfitted warmly enough for the winter winds. Where was their Gore-Tex?!

When they reached the top, Ham checked his watch. He was about to announce their time when the tourists turned around —

“Protein shake?” It was Dan.

“Energy bar?” And Amy.

“Electrolyte replenisher?” And Jonah.

Then Hamilton noticed the helicopter behind them. He wasn’t sure how he’d missed it. Natalie and Ian waved from the window. “How did — ?”

“No time, we’ve got a ball drop to attend. Eisenhower, we’re taking Hamilton for the night, if that’s all right with you,” Amy said.

To her surprise, Eisenhower nodded, defeated-looking, and said, “Be back for triathlon training.”

“We’ll have him back for you by morning. Official Cahill New Year’s Eve business,” Amy affirmed.

“Dad, I wanted to hang out with you tonight,” Ham insisted.

“Son,” Eisenhower replied, “it’s all right. I’ll see you next year.”

And his father laughed at his own lame joke, for the first time in forever.



From the copter, the Eiffel Tower looked like a rocket ship of light. They circled up to the top to see it from every beautiful angle. Amy thanked the pilot, whom she and Dan had commissioned early that morning back in Attleboro, the first of many calls they'd made on the fly, frantically planning for this moment. She hopped down the step. The entire wraparound balcony was theirs for the night. *Please don't let this be lame*, she prayed. It was so much easier to plan an agenda than to plan a party.

Amy opened her arms, tilted back her head, and looked at the faces of her cousins, who were staring back at her, dumbfounded.

“Tonight’s agenda is something of the utmost importance,” she began. “More important than anything we’ve talked about before. So important, in fact, that it’s the *only* thing on the agenda. Tonight’s objective: HAVE FUN.” She spun around to take in the 360-degree view. “Let the games begin!”

Heat lamps were perched overhead, so the night felt like April and not the end of December. Waiters emerged, carrying trays of appetizers and sparkling cider.

“Oooh, bacon-wrapped snails, my favorite!” Nellie said, filling up a napkin.

“Got any burgers?” Ham asked, and Dan led him to the sliders bar, where there were mini burgers with every kind of topping — ketchup, ranch dressing, even Cheetos. Dan had made sure, during the insane hour when they’d made all the calls, that the party wasn’t going to be all frou-frou stuff. His appetite was back with a vengeance.

“These truffles are actually quite passable,” Natalie whispered to Ian.

“Natalie, follow me,” Amy said, grabbing her hand. Sinead had insisted on a trunk of clothes brought up from the Champs-Élysées.

“Let’s see, here’s a tux for Ian,” Amy said, pushing hangers on the cart. “Black-and-white tracksuit for Ham, T-shirt that *looks* like a tux for Dan, leather suit for Jonah, and, voilà, ball gowns for us.”

As Amy came out of the bathroom, wearing a red velvet gown, Natalie’s calm-cool expression morphed into one of pure shock. “You look quite nice!” Natalie said. “I hardly recognized you!”

“Don’t act so surprised,” Amy said, swatting at her with gloves.

“Well, *anything* is an improvement,” Natalie allowed.

When they reappeared outside, everyone else already neatly changed, Ian was talking to Nellie, but he stopped midsentence when he saw Amy in her party dress, his jaw hanging slightly open. She smiled at him, and he nodded back approvingly.

At the deejay booth, Jonah spun records beneath a mirrored disco ball that was timed to drop at midnight. The look on his face was pure magic — the pop star forgetting his fame and just rocking out to headphones, like no one was there.

Ham was locked into the Wii they’d taken with them at the last minute — bowling up a storm for a new high score. “Super Soakers and firecrackers for everyone,” Dan said, breaking out a box of the special delivery he’d ordered back in Attleboro. Amy gave a sigh of relief. Dan was still bruised up, but clearly he was regaining his old self.

“Yes, and crossword puzzles and board games for our ride back!” Amy chirped in. “And Polaroids to remember this night. And scrapbooks for the vault.”

Suddenly, it was all too much. Amy didn’t know how all of this, how all of them, had come together, but she could barely contain her emotion. She raised a glass of sparkling cider.

“Ahem,” she said softly, and everyone stopped to listen. Public speaking would never be her strong suit, but right now she’d give it a shot. “I know you’ve all been through a lot,” she said, searching each of their faces. “You’ve risked your lives.” There was Sinead, silently nodding. “Your closeness to your parents.” Ham caught her eye. “Your reputation.” Jonah regarded her gravely. “Your legacy.” Natalie and Ian lifted their chins. And then, to Dan, “And your chance to be a normal kid.” Amy hoped she could make it through without crying.

“I don’t know what I’m doing half the time.”

“You don’t say?” Dan grinned.

“We have so much to look out for. A lot hangs in the balance. But, tonight, we look out for the most important ones. Tonight” — she paused, almost through, lifting her glass a final time before she could finally kick back — “tonight, we look out for each other. Because what’s the point of being the world’s most powerful family if you don’t get to enjoy it once in a while? Am I right?”

“To the spoils of our riches,” Ian said.

“And the new year,” Natalie echoed, looking around.

“Next year,” Jonah vowed, “I’ll be around more. I promise. Resolution time, y’all.”

“I’ll make each of you special decryptors, so you can know what’s going on,” Sinead said.

“I will bench three Cahills at once,” Ham broke in.

“We’ll be nicer to poor people,” Natalie promised, “like all of you.”

“I will collect more baseball cards,” Dan cried.

“My resolution?” Amy said. “To try and not always go it alone.” She looked around at the beautiful night, the Seine lit up below them, her cousins decked out in fancy and funny clothes, the ridiculously lavish food and lights and music and games. She looked at her brother, whom she had almost lost the night before.

They were an impossible group, no denying it, and they would test her over and over in the years to come. But they were her family.



Six hours later, as the Cahills watched the sun rise above the Eiffel Tower, midnight struck at the Rosenbloom house back in Boston. Far away from slider bars and cheery toasts, Professor Mark Rosenbloom sat staring at the television screen as the New Year’s ball dropped in Times Square. His

ten-year-old son, Atticus, was asleep on the shoulder of Mark's older son, Jake. Atticus couldn't sleep by himself lately; he kept having nightmares about losing his mother and waking up to the horrible knowledge that those nightmares were true. Nobody said a word at dinners — they just stared into plates of food other people had dropped off. As if anyone felt like eating, anyway.

"Happy New Year," Mark whispered to Jake.

"Whatever," Jake replied.

While the Cahills were off gallivanting in the City of Light, the Rosenbloom house was cloaked in darkness. In the shadows, a figure slid away from the house, scheming his next move. It would be swift and deadly, just as it had been for the mother of Jake and Atticus. Looking back in at the grieving figures in the Rosenbloom living room, the man chuckled to himself.

He had executed his plan flawlessly.

The Guardian was dead. It was a tricky piece of work, but the man had administered the poison to Astrid himself. A steady dusting of undetectable, lethal powder in the pages of the library book only she was studying. Now she was gone and no one suspected a thing, certainly not her two motherless sons or her bereaved husband. The man started to turn away, but a movement inside the house caught his eye.

It was Mark, carrying a sleeping Atticus upstairs. The man on the sidewalk made a decision, and then smiled. *Guardians may be cute when they're little, the man thought, but they grow up to be such nuisances.* The man would eliminate Atticus as well, but that could wait. He had other things in mind right now — the Cahills laughing it up halfway across the globe. The real games were about to begin.

Vesper One's New Year's resolution: World Domination.

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